

2014-02-06 Cell use at Seahawks parade wireless networks

Wednesday, May 14, 2014
7:57 AM

The Seattle Times

Winner of Nine Pulitzer Prizes

Local News

Originally published February 6, 2014 at 8:50 PM | Page modified February 7, 2014 at 12:30 AM

Cell use at Seahawks parade swamped wireless networks

Overwhelmed by hordes of cellphone users trying to snap pictures and text friends, the downtown wireless network grew sluggish and unresponsive. But police and fire officials say their emergency-communications work on radio frequencies and weren't affected.

By Lynn Thompson

Seattle Times staff reporter

Wireless networks were overwhelmed Wednesday by an estimated 700,000 Seahawks fans trying to text and call friends, and upload photos and videos from the Super Bowl parade onto Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

People reported delays and failures as they tried to access websites and send texts and email.

By about 1:30 p.m., the Seattle Emergency Operations Center sent out an alert asking people to stay off their phones and computers to help keep 911 lines open.

Police and fire officials say their dispatchers, officers and firefighters use radio frequencies and aren't affected by heavy cellphone use. But they worried that wireless calls to 911 might not get through because the cellular networks were overwhelmed.

"Our main concern is that someone who dials 911 gets the help they need," said Capt. Dick Reed, director of the 911 Center for the Seattle Police Department.

He said police didn't know of anyone not getting aid because they couldn't get through to 911 on a cellphone.

But he said that an unusually high number of patrol officers radioed the 911 dispatch center to ask for aid for people along the parade route, from near the Space Needle to CenturyLink Field.

Usually those calls would be made by the citizens themselves, Reed said. Dispatchers wondered if 911 calls weren't getting through.

Reed said it might have happened simply because so many police were visible that people instead turned to them for help. But he said it's part of the emergency-operations playbook to ask people to limit phone use so that urgent calls can get through.

Cellphone providers say 911 calls are prioritized on voice networks. They say they tried to anticipate the heavy use during the parade and rerouted wireless traffic to increase network

capacity. But even pre-parade estimates of half a million spectators proved low.

Verizon brought in two mobile-cell sites and added capacity at five downtown cell sites.

"The numbers were just staggering," said Scott Charlston, public-relations director for Verizon.

He said Verizon's voice calls and data requests use different networks, so calls go through even amid heavy data demand, but that isn't necessarily the case with other carriers. Voice use peaked at 130,000 calls between 10 and 11 a.m. Data requests peaked at 5.2 million between noon and 1 p.m. Charlston guessed that was about 100 times greater than normal usage.

And that's just Verizon. There's also AT&T, T-Mobile, Sprint and a variety of other providers.

The city of Seattle's Emergency Operations Center was opened Wednesday and staffed with 119 people from 25 agencies to be ready in case of an emergency, said Barb Graff, director of the city's Office of Emergency Management.

She said Wednesday's communication issues paralleled what they would expect in a disaster such as an earthquake, because the very nature of a disaster causes communication systems to be overwhelmed.

Even pre-wireless networks such as landlines could be knocked out by a storm or earthquake.

The city's emergency plans call for cellphone providers to add mobile-cell sites to increase the communications capacity.

And when the center sent out its request that people stay off the phone network Wednesday, Graff said, officials didn't just send news releases.

The Seattle Transportation Department posted the alert on its electronic-message boards and CenturyLink flashed it on the stadium-video screen, she said.

Kyle Moore, public-information officer for the Seattle Fire Department, said he's always getting laughed at for using an "old-school pager."

But he gets the last laugh knowing his device will respond in an emergency.

"If the cellphone towers go down, this pager works," Moore said.

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